

What Space Must the Church Occupy?

Wearing smells from laboratories, facing a dying nation of moving paper fantasy, listening for the new told lies, with supreme visions of lonely tunes... let the sunshine, let the sunshine in.
—from the musical *Hair*

Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.
Psalm 139:12

At a 50th birthday party that my dear wife recently threw for me, Pastor Bill Betts waxed eloquent about the “Greek, Roman, and Jewish phases of our lives.” The first phase swirls with lofty idealisms, dreams about our future and the world we hope to change. The second is where we take on the world with concrete energy, striving to make our mark. It is in the Jewish phase, however, when we realize that, when all is said and done, it is our friendships, family traditions, and how we’ve lived our lives with one another that ultimately matters. Bill’s words provided food for thought for many of us that day.

While I’m still somewhere in the second phase (or at least would like to think I am), my “Jewishness” is clearly emerging, particularly as I find myself often pondering the life of my mom and dad, the world they experienced as young parents, and how their world can inform the lens through which I understand ours today. Which made my sister’s birthday gift—tickets to the musical *Hair*—quite timely, particularly in light of today’s Occupy Wall Street phenomenon.

The social unrest poignantly captured in *Hair* has its roots in several significant events that played out in 1961, the year my mom gave birth to me. Americans were given much to fear that year. The Soviet Union launched bomb tests, constructed the Berlin Wall, and sent the first human being out into space. Soviet-backed

Fidel Castro formally declared Cuba a Communist state and successfully thwarted our CIA’s Bay of Pigs invasion. Most germane to the youth angst of *Hair*, the United States initiated military operations in Vietnam. And as if these events weren’t enough for a decade, folks would soon reel from the shock of three political assassinations, including a standing president and the leader of the civil rights movement. Intriguingly, MLK was assassinated on the heels of his vocal opposition to the war.

Without question, it wasn’t easy being a mom in the ’60s, as sons and daughters everywhere blew the top off the sexual mores of the day and liberation meant regular psychedelic flights from reality. *Hair* was a reminder to me that the ’60s revolution was as much spiritual as it was libidinous, as youth, very much entering their “Greek” phase of life, searched for a more worthy meta-narrative than the pursuit of an American dream that required the napalming of Southeast Asian villages. Unmoved by Washington bureaucratic fantasies of American peace and tired of being lied to, they searched for love, meaning, and universality through myriad quasi-religious experiences.

Social observers can draw parallels between the anti-Pentagon dissent of the ’60s and the present-day revolt against the global banking elite—for example, the camps, the peaceful rallies, the predominance of young leadership, and encampments of solidarity around a common cause. Most significantly, both groups share an acutely grave awareness that “things are not the way they’re supposed to be”—on the one hand, the gross brutality of endless war, and on the other, the gross inequity of a system that sanctions, and indeed facilitates, the redistribution of wealth from the masses to the top 1 percent while the percentage of Americans living in poverty steadily rises beyond 15 percent, according to the latest census.

The angst about mounting inequality, as resounding through Occupy Wall Street gatherings everywhere, is rightly finding resonance among faith commu-



nities across the nation which, in turn, seek ways to engage. Inter-religious organizations have set up their own tents. Some offer meals, clothing, and other material support. Others, if perhaps from the sidelines, echo prophetic concern or theological interpretation about economic injustice from their respective faith traditions, providing guidance to a movement that has sometimes lacked clear direction.

While there aren’t black and white formulae for what the church’s engagement should look like, we can be clear about this—Christ’s people exist, in their life together, as “salt and light” to a world trapped in darkness. Embodying the grand, redemptive story of God, the church exposes the delusion of economic ideologies (or the murky promises of the derivatives market), making visible a God who provides enough for everyone. Bearing witness to the power of the cross to dissolve barriers of race and class, the church occupies an alternative social and economic space that brings to light our common poverty—and hope—whether banker or beggar, police or protester.

Let the Son shine in!



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